

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE B-7

WASHINGTON POST
23 June 1985

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More Polygraphs?

Just as sure as the grass grows and the Potomac flows, the Pentagon will use the Walker family espionage case as justification for even more rampant use of "lie detectors" on its employees.

Our use of quotation marks is intended to emphasize our doubts about polygraph machines. We agree with the decisions of those judges who have refused to admit polygraph test results as evidence because of their frequently demonstrated unreliability.

We are also concerned that compulsory polygraph testing is an infringement of a citizen's Fifth Amendment rights against self-incrimination (if the machine works) and a terrible injustice if it costs the job of someone who's innocent but simply nervous when strapped to a voodoo device.

In addition, we suspect polygraphs are often used not to catch potential traitors or other criminals but to expose patriotic government employees who have felt duty bound to leak to the press information that corrupt bosses don't want the American public to know.

There is also the distinct possibility that the most dangerous spies—the professionals who have burrowed into the government's innards over the years—have been trained to withstand detection by the most sophisticated polygraphs and the most experienced operators.

With all these reservations, and with the candid avowal that we oppose any polygraph testing, we'll present the intelligence agencies' case for the polygraph. This is taken from their own prepared statements and studies obtained by our associate Tony Capaccio.

The most dramatic examples of polygraph success were contained in a report by Philip Pease, security director at the National Security Administration. Here are three from recent years:

■ A man applying for an NSA job following retirement from the military was asked if he intended to commit espionage against the United States. He denied it, of course, but the polygraph called him a liar, and he broke down. "The applicant then described several recent visits to the Soviet Embassy to make arrangements to defect," Pease reported.

■ An employee of a NSA contractor, caught by the polygraph, "admit-

ted that during two periods when he lived abroad he had been a scientific adviser to the chief of a foreign military intelligence service, and that he might in the future pass classified U.S. information to that service," Pease reported, adding: "On his application forms he had concealed this activity, accounting for time abroad as being in an academic affiliation."

■ Another contractor-employee, unsettled by the polygraph, proceeded to describe "in detail the longtime espionage activities by her former husband on behalf of a foreign power." Pease did not disclose exactly for whom the woman's ex-husband had spied, and whether his espionage activities had been directed against the United States. Nor did he say whether the accusation turned out to be true.

The NSA security boss did append a stunning wrap-up statement that "other applicants for employment or contractor access have admitted to such crimes as murder, arson, rape, train-wrecking—admissions gained after the examiner detected reaction to relevant test questions."

The CIA also sings the praises of the polygraph in a review of its personnel security program. "Polygraph testing has played a crucial role in the CIA's security program for the past 35 years," it said. "During this time, the CIA has developed incontrovertible evidence of the value of this vital procedure."

Congress has granted a third agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, provisional permission to give polygraph tests to what the agency's security chief calls "a restricted number of employees who occupy 'critical intelligence positions.'" Although DIA considers this a step forward, recent espionage history suggests that hostile intelligence services try to recruit already-cleared personnel in lower-paying jobs, who might not fit in the "critical" category.

The DIA claimed "frequent instances over the years where fully cleared DIA employees who were nominated for joint-intelligence community assignments were unable to successfully complete a required pre-assignment polygraph examination." In almost all these cases, subsequent investigation resulted in "dismissal from DIA employment."

In all these cases, however, there is no proof that a single one of the million or more polygraph examinations the government has administered has uncovered an active intelligence employee spying for a foreign country.

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